

**Volume II**

**Issue I**

# **The Lowell Pearl**

**A Publication of the  
University of Massachusetts • Lowell  
Literary Society**

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\* Special thanks to the Student Government for funding, and to *The Connector* for the use of their facilities.

*The Lowell Pearl* is a bi-annual publication of the University of Massachusetts at Lowell Literary Society.

Poetry, short stories, and essays should be sent to

**Literary Society  
South Campus Student Information Center  
University of Massachusetts at Lowell  
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All submissions must be typed. Please enclose a SASE or University box number. Please do not send originals, as no submissions will be returned.

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Edward Hyland

## Natural History

*-for Robin, my wife*

### 1 The Lake

Stepping out of your clothes,  
late afternoon sun in the hair  
on your legs, you join me  
at water's edge.  
Wading into our reflections  
we move through the surface chill,  
touching each other for balance,  
catching our breath  
beneath each other's hand.

### 2 Late Afternoon

Gathering wood for the fire  
we make our way among the trees,  
steps silent on pine needles:  
like swords through a magician's basket  
sunbeams pierce the shadows around us.

### 3 Night Air

Logs collapsing on each other  
lift orange sparks on the night air.  
Voices carry low over the lake  
from a canoe passing in the dark.  
We squint into the heat of our fire;  
you are in me as flames are in wood.

### 4 The Midnight Garden

I crawl from our down bag;  
under bare feet,  
coolness of pine needles.  
Unable to say what woke me  
I wander to lake's edge  
and stand very still.  
The moon, nearly full, turns  
even withered, empty trees  
into a garden; endless,  
beautiful and shadowy.

### 5 First Light

In the early dawn you swim  
through low, thin mist  
rising over the lake. Slowly  
you move toward shore as if  
my eyes were pulling you in.  
Before I can whisper your name  
you look up and see me.

### 6 Morning Wind

Wind rises dark off the lake.  
In lightening flashes  
shadows of branches extend like arms  
over our tent to threaten,  
or perhaps to offer blessings; sometimes  
it's hard to tell fear from excitement.  
We make love between lightning and thunder,  
judging distance by counting heartbeats.

**Edward Hyland**

### **Winter on Silver Street**

The window above the sink  
is a black mirror.  
I can see you behind me at the table  
staring into your coffee.  
Who would believe me  
if I insisted that silence  
is the paper cone a magician uses;  
no matter how much you pour into it  
you cannot satisfy it's thirst.

**Edward Hyland**

### **Finding Our Way Back**

You know how it is;  
you stand looking out the kitchen window  
wrapped in your grey bathrobe:  
silence like the sound  
of a dog barking in the next street.  
I'm sitting at the table isolated  
beyond the smoke of endless cigarettes.  
The walls are swept by headlights  
of a passing car as if by searchlights.  
There is no return to each other,  
or if there is, it's the return of exiles  
journeying to the place  
they've begun to fear no longer exists.



**Charlene Brusso**

## Life in Wartime

Here I lie in Mt. Hope Cemetery. Not long to wait now.

The wind moves through the leaves in the trees, brittle leaves brown and frosted, crackling in the cold breath of autumn. The sky is grey. The name on the gravestone beside me is barely legible after decades of acid rain: James F. Bartlett, killed in 1867 at the age of twenty.

Crystal was twenty-five.

Rochester's Civil War dead surround me like brothers. Behind is a cement-plugged Gatling gun, antique metal weathered green. It rests on a granite plinth with a plaque that honors men dead a hundred and fifty years before I was ever a soldier. I can feel the weight of their names, and their silent approval. They understand about death and killing.

Through the leaves I have a clear vantage of Phase bridge, a metal and concrete umbilical between the old university and the new campus, connecting ivy-bound brick to smooth polished steel and copper-filmed glass. The bridge is empty now. It's early, and during October break most of the students will sleep in, quick to forget responsibility as only the young can be. Crystal was twenty-five, and I am twenty-six, and she is dead, and I am old.

The frost on the grass crushed under me is melting through my jeans. I lie stomach down. My jacket keeps my chest dry, and I wear a scarf wrapped around my throat and tucked into my collar, but I don't feel warm. I rest on my elbows, flex cold fingers and rub my hands together, check the rifle sight again. Through the quartz optic I can follow the motion of the red laser spot on the bridge rail. Everything in place. Kurt Andrysic will begin to cross Phase bridge in ten minutes, and I'll line up the

crosshairs on his head, behind the eye and above the ear. Easy, just like Bogota and Medellin and Cali. Pull the trigger and it will be all over.

The wind blows and leaves sift down and scatter around me. The weather will be gusting later, blowing rain and soggy parchment leaves through the ranks of eroded gravestones. It's a good day for rain.

I remember the way it sounded on the windows beyond the vertical blinds. I remember holding her and listening to it, rain tapping on the tall glass panes. Light would filter in, dusty beams through the drawn slats, but never very much. We were nocturnal creatures, working in the dark, sleeping in the day. Or not sleeping, sometimes, just listening to the rain.

At times it was too peaceful. One late afternoon I paced the bedroom naked while Crystal sat on the bed and brushed out her long sorrel hair. Our loft apartment occupied the northwest corner of the eleventh floor, high enough to see the sunset reflected in the water of Irondequoit bay, and the burning light filled the room.

"Moran, stop it, you're making me nervous." Crystal brushed her hair into three smooth ropes and began to braid it the way she always did before she sat down at her computer to work. "What's wrong?" she asked over her shoulder, twisting and pulling the strands tight.

"Nothing." I looked out the window.

"I've heard that before." She finished the braid and tied it off with a bit of red plastic-coated wire; her side of the white dresser was always covered with pieces of her latest hardware project. "You've got the wall-crawlies, don't you?"

I shrugged. "Probably just too much caffeine."

The light on the water was fading; one by one, security lights popped on across the neighborhood. I heard Crystal's bare feet on the carpet behind me. Her arms came around my waist and she laid her cheek against my shoulder.

"You can stop checking your back, you know. We don't live in the Combat Zone anymore." Then she slapped me on the ass. "Come on, get dressed. Time to go to work." I made a grab for her and she danced away, laughing, dispelling the dark mood,



and I tried not to let her see me like that again.

With binoculars I scan left from the bridge, along the paved footpath that cuts behind the biggest dorms to the main library. The carillon in the white library dome chimes three quarters of the hour, Big Ben-style, round notes carried on the wind to my position, and there he is, right on schedule.

He steps clear of the revolving door and walks past the granite pillars that support the protruding stories above the entrance. His suit is grey, well-cut and designed to be kind to the weight he's managed to accumulate in his forty-odd years. His silver hair gleams like a polished helmet even in the dismal morning's grey light. He carries a thick leather satchel and bobs along with short pigeonish steps. He is on his way to a nine o'clock meeting with the rest of the cognitive science department, which he heads. It will take him four minutes to walk to the bridge, a few seconds more to reach its center, and then it ends. The meeting will have to proceed without him.

Resting on my elbows I follow Andrysic with the binoculars. Halfway across the parking lot between the library and the footpath he turns and pauses, and a woman enters the fields of view: Amanda Vandermaas, neurophysicist and Andrysic's research partner, exiled from her homeland by the South African government during the intelligentsia purges seven years ago; Crystal introduced me to her once. She is younger than Andrysic, maybe thirty-five, sinewy and dark, with high Afro cheekbones and startling blue eyes. Her hair is cornrowed into shoulder-length braids, and her skin is the color of Turkish coffee. Crystal liked her.

Vandermaas catches up to Andrysic and together they walk along the footpath. She shakes her head in response to something he says, and there is a gleam from the steel inset at the base of her skull, the socket that allows her to interface with the machine Crystal helped give intelligence to. Wires, artificial dendrites, carry electric impulses from socket up spinal column to the visual cortex within the brain. Crystal explained once why it was necessary to bypass the optic nerve, but I've forgotten why. I

never understood it anyway.

Andrysic arranged the surgery at the university med center immediately after Crystal was accepted as a doctoral student. She was so wired she talked about it almost continuously until the day she was scheduled to go under the laser.

"With the interface I'll be able to talk directly to Kurt's program," she explained for the twentieth time as we dodged past each other in the kitchen to make dinner one morning a few days before the operation. "It'll be like having an entire new set of senses, and a new world to use them in. I'll be learning things along with the AI; we can teach each other."

The afternoon they admitted her, I stood behind her chair and watched her sign the release forms. The last time I'd seen so much fine print was when I'd volunteered for experimental medical procedures to qualify for Special Forces training. The Army cutters had called what they did to me 'enhancement'; I noticed Andrysic had printed the same word in the empty space on the forms Crystal signed.

In a white-tiled room I stood in a corner and watched a balding male technician shave her head. Long locks of red brown hair fell free and slid down her smock to the green and white speckled floor. I remember the oblate shape of her head, how shiny her scalp was above her dark brows and enormous eyes. Her hair lay on the floor in coils the color of newly fallen leaves.

"There you go." The tech shut off the razor and laughed. "You can tell your friends you're starting some new retro-fad."

I picked up a handful of smooth chestnut hair and wound it around my fingers.

"Moran, it's all right," Crystal said. "It'll grow back."

She took it from me and braided it quickly, shoved it into the side pocket of her canvas carry-all. "I'll save it for you," she told me, and I looked for it later, but I couldn't find it anywhere.

Andrysic had arranged to tape the operation and simultaneously run it on closed-circuit video. "You're welcome to watch with the staff, Mr. Michaels," he invited me. "Since the procedure is still experimental, there's bound to be a 'standing room only' crowd."



Crystal talked me into going.

Andrysic saved me a seat in the front row of the auditorium. The room wasn't large, might have held fifty people, and nearly every seat was taken. The high-resolution video was projected onto an enormous screen at the front of the room. Static sparked on the screen behind Andrysic as he spoke a few words of introduction to the assembled staff. Then he sat down and pushed a button on the remote control he held. The static cleared and I saw Crystal.

She lay on her stomach under a sheet, her smooth shaved skull bracketed in place by gleaming steel pins. Her eyes were half-open. The surgical team stood around her. I knew one of them was Amanda Vandermaas, but I couldn't pick her out of the rest of the anonymous green scrubs. My hands clenched as one of the surgeons drew dashed lines on Crystal's skin with a felt tip marker. Another held the business end of the laser scalpel, a fiber optic cable connected to a grey console with a few knobs and dials. He flicked a switch on the panel and a streak of static formed across the bottom of the screen as the beam came on line.

Dr. Vandermaas made the first cuts with a steel scalpel, silver blade moving over Crystal's skin so lightly that at first I didn't think she'd touched her. Crystal started to bleed and my stomach churned. I could swear I saw her eyelids flicker. Then the green smocks surrounded her and the video switched from side view to directly overhead.

The close-ups gave you the illusion that the doctors were just practicing on a cheap piece of meat from the local butchershop. I was the only one in the room who wasn't fooled. I sat with my hands tightened into useless fists and I watched as they cut away the back of her skull and threaded the hair-fine wires into her brain.

The room was too hot. I got up and managed to walk out. The hospital corridor was quiet and a little cooler. For a moment I just leaned on the wall. Then I went to the nearest men's room and threw up.

Andrysic and Vandermaas have reached the point where

the path crosses behind Anthony dorm. Now they slow, come to a stop. Vandermaas raises a pointing finger and shakes it once, twice, punctuating the words I see her lips shaping. Andrysic shakes his head, a firm 'No!' easily read in the movement of his mouth. He makes an openhanded sweeping motion as if to push her away, and starts walking toward the bridge again. Vandermaas says something, passion evident in her raised chin and narrow eyes. She runs the few steps to catch up with him, and they keep arguing as they walk. Less than two minutes now, until they reach the bridge.

I shift my weight, stretching my left shoulder where the regenerated tissue has stiffened. Damp weather does that to me, ever since I had the arm replaced last year. It was the last of the old military blackware, there's nothing left in me now except the reflex booster built into the base of my spine. Makes me faster, hair-trigger, enough to give me an edge in a lot of situations. but it didn't do a damned bit of good against what killed Crystal.

The shoulder is sore most of the time now. This winter the ache will probably become permanent, without her to rub it away. It isn't fair. From the beginning she knew just how to touch me.

On the surface we didn't have much in common. She professed growing up in Canada, working her way south from Ottawa through Toronto and Buffalo to Rochester. Among the East Coast datarunners she had a reputation for being a slickshot, intuitive and patient and smooth. "Don't believe a word of that," Crystal would say, shaking her head. "If I were THAT good, no one would know who I was. The problem is, my technique is my fingerprint; after a while people start to recognize it."

That was how Andrysic found her. Traced her down and made her an offer she couldn't refuse: the chance to see life in software, to work intimately with a sentence stored in patterns of electrons and magnetic fields.

After a week of tests Dr. Vandermaas let Crystal out of the med center, sent her home with a sheet of dermal analgesics and an order to rest. "We'll work you hard enough once Kurt brings the project fully on-line," she told Crystal, and handed her a green and red batik scarf, like the ones the rebels in South Africa wear.



"My brother sent me this from Johannesburg when I had my surgery," she said. "I wore it until my hair grew back. I thought you might like it."

Crystal thanked her and tied the scarf around her stubbly scalp with a lopsided grin. When we got home she made faces at herself in the mirror. "I look like a pirate — all I need is an eyepatch." She rubbed the bandage on the back of her neck and yawned. "And a big cup of coffee. These damned painkillers are knocking me out."

I hooked my arm behind her knees and swung her up against my chest. "What are you going to do, tie me down?" She wrapped her arms around my neck.

"You don't seem really worried about it."

"That's because I know how to handle you." She yawned again, turned her face into my neck to muffle it, her breath warm on my skin. "You Special Forces types are all alike: too macho for your own good. Go ahead, carry me off, see it I care."

She was asleep when I laid her down on the bed.

She was home for six weeks, sleeping, playing at her workstation and grumbling about the wait while she healed. She started doing yoga to try to relax. Her stubbly hair grew into a soft dark halo, more red than brown. It felt silky as fur, but I only saw it when she slept; she wore the red and green scarf the rest of the time.

Andrysic called every day to see how she was feeling, and to tell her what was going on in the lab. After four days I realized every time Crystal spoke with him it only made her more anxious to get back to work. He needed her, needed the new interface she carried in the back of her neck. "He can't even boot up the damn thing without me there to plug it in," Crystal said from a half-lotus on the couch. "He needs the deep link, and that's me."

"Sounds like a covert operation, and he's you're CO or something."

"He's my thesis advisor; it's the same thing."

When she went back to the lab she came home with headaches that made her squint against the light, and she started to keep the blinds drawn all the time. She swore there was nothing wrong, but she talked in her sleep, in a flat, toneless

language that I couldn't identify.

We're almost there, Andrysic. I remember the last time I crossed Phase bridge, new campus to old, walking away from your lab and everything I'd seen there, everything I'd touched. You'd phoned and told me something terrible had happened, but underneath the words I could hear the excitement in your voice, could tell you were already sorting out what to document for scientific posterity. I remember you wouldn't let the paramedics disconnect her until you'd finished your backups. You probably started to edit the data right after I left.

The sun was swimming up through the haze in the east, and she was gone. Not dead, no, you were quick to point that out. No, the meat was stable, still breathing. There was even a faint blush the color of normal sleep on its cheeks. It slumped over the terminal, white-jacketed cable in the back of the neck snaking down to the grey and white cabinet that held the liquid nitrogen-cooled guts of your pet AI. An LCD monitor displayed data windows striped with a series of parallel lines. A colorkey in the corner marked the AI's output as red; the body's was blue. The red lines bounced rhythmically, like something by John Phillip Sousa, but the blue lines were flat; there was no brain trace from the body, and its hands were cold, like the frost melting on Jimmy Bartlett's gravestone here beside me.

Crystal had no next-of-kin that I knew of. We had no legal claims on each other. Now I wish we had, because then you couldn't have taken her body. Is it still vivisection when the subject is braindead? Dr. Vandermaas would know.

And now I'm watching you, Andrysic, watching you walk toward the foot of Phase bridge. This is the last time you'll cross it, you bastard. I'm going to make damn sure of that.

Amanda Vandermaas touches your arm and you shake her off. I can't read your lips but I know your expression. Don't bother me with this, you're telling her, I won't change my mind. You're a fool, Andrysic.

Just ten more paces and you're on the bridge — there, your expensive leather-clad toe touches the concrete, and then the sole



of the other foot, and Vandermaas stands back on the footpath and watches you walk away, up the arc to the middle of the bridge.

You don't know this, Andrysic, but she came to the apartment last night, while I was cleaning the gun. I had the pieces laid out on an old sheet on the kitchen counter, and the case leaned in the corner, gaping open and empty. She saw it all.

"*The Journal of Experimental Intelligence* accepted his abstract," she told me. I picked up the rifle barrel and rubbed oil over the smooth black steel with a rag. She leaned against the refrigerator and watched me for a while. "Banana Wars?" she asked. "Yeah. Colombia," I said, and started to work on the firing mechanism. "It'd be a good idea to stay off Phase bridge tomorrow morning." She drew a breath and nodded, and then she left.

I exchange the binoculars for the flat 2D field of the rifle sight, and Andrysic's head comes into sharp focus, every pure sliver strand of hair stiff and still as wire. Finger cocked, my thumb slides off the safety and now the moment comes and he and I are the only two people in the world. Forefinger tightens and the silenced rifle jumps, butt nudging my chest, with the vented hiss of ejected gas and faint smell of propellant. Neat round hole. Red stains sliver hair and the opposite rail of the bridge, and I watch him fold, knees giving way with no outstretched arms to catch himself as he falls. A red and grey puddle starts to form around his head on the concrete.

I pull my eye away from the rifle sight. Dr. Vandermaas isn't looking at him. She's standing at the foot of the bridge, staring up to my position behind the trees on the hill. I can feel her watching me. Slowly she raises her arm in a closed fist salute that I've seen before too many times to mistake now. It must be cross-cultural, I guess, if it means the same thing in Colombia as it does in South Africa: defiance and solidarity, and sometimes, victory.

But I don't feel anything. I unwrap the batik scarf from my neck and fold back a triangle, keep folding the triangle to the end and tuck in the last corner. Lay it on the grave beside me. Military history teaches that the Civil War generation didn't have

the salute. They got flags instead, but the scarf is all I have to give him.

He was a soldier. I think he'll understand.



Steven S. Slater

## The Yard

It's only a dot on a map, a small California town in the northern Mojave Desert, but it was where I lived and it was home. The town's name isn't important, since its only claim to fame is that the Manson Family was captured about twenty miles further north. Death Valley is less than an hour away, and not much lives in the area except those few plants and animals that God has sentenced into mutation. The desert holly gets red berries in the winter, but its leaves stay misty green all year, and the horny toads really do have horns and squirt blood from their eyes when frightened. It seems that all life is confused there.

The desert has a few scents capable of triggering memories for me. After a rain, a clean and fresh-washed smell comes over the land that reminds me of sheets that have been line-dried. It only lasts a while, but it makes me feel good. If you take some sagebrush leaves and rub them between your palms you can smell the strong odor and maybe remember some spicy stew you once had. I do.

One fact about the desert shouldn't be overlooked. It gets hot there. Damn hot. It's a dry, breath-stealing heat that can only compare to the Sun itself. I've seen the thermometer ignore one hundred twenty degrees on a July morning and threaten to touch 130 by afternoon. The asphalt streets shimmer and shine with the heat they cannot absorb and nobody goes barefoot in summer. Puddles from a rainstorm the night before melt away in minutes and sweat evaporates while still in your pores. At night, it will cool off before you can finish complaining about the heat and the temperature will have swung a full seventy degrees. No wonder the animals all live underground.

The area is littered with places named after Death itself. Names like Poison Canyon, Badwater, and The Devil's

Playground. I suppose the first settlers to find this hellhole didn't like it too much, but I did. It was my hometown and it contributed to my essence just like your hometown did — I am who I am because of that place.

There aren't many things a teenager can do there. Most try as hard as they can to get out as often as possible. I liked to hang out at the various "garden spots" of adolescence: the Bowl, which looked more like a huge bite out of the land than anything else, because you could see who was coming; the old mining camps that were always exciting and risky—especially at night; and the Indian Springs with the cool water that came out of the rocks to feed the trees that crept as close as the sand would allow. These were the favored places of my youth and I share them with some regret.

Another place I visited was the Yard. The first time I went there I was just sixteen, and it was my first "car date." Just the four of us—my friend Norman, his girlfriend, her sister, and me—out cruising. We had drifted by some of the other places, but someone was already there and we wanted to be alone. Having run out of haunts, we set our sights on the Yard. There was no need to scale the fence since the gate was open. We roamed around in pairs, promptly losing Norman and his girlfriend. I had just met the sister, and she was beautiful. Her hair was a silvery blonde in the moonlight, and she was younger than I by a year or so. Her perfume had a clean, pleasant smell that still makes my heart skip a beat seventeen years later. We sat down, talked some, and did the things that young folks do.

It didn't matter that we were in the Yard—we could have been on Mars for all I cared. It was a good night, with a clear sky overhead and a too-bright moon that cast spidery blue shadows. After a while, she got chilled so we went back to the car. I had seen Norman and his girlfriend scooting between the Yard's decorations and into the toolshed and figured he was up to no good. Eventually they came back, having abandoned the idea of trying to scare us, and we put that place behind us. It was a fine evening, and I had that sweet scent etched into my mind as a trophy.



Four years later, I went back to the Yard. A lot of sand had dropped from the top to the bottom, but the hourglass wasn't empty yet. Not for me, at least. Many things were the same and a few were different. The fence, with its spikes across the top ("Keeps them in," Norman used to say), still surrounded the place but looked a little tired and weak. The gate was still open, and the keeper's shack with the door that didn't need to be locked was the same as always. The moon was hiding, and the early afternoon sun was just shifting into high, making black pools of shadow barely larger than your shoes. There had been a few additions, too, and some were still shiny with newness.

I was twenty and a soldier. I was thinner, taller, and the pimples were gone. No date this time—I had come alone. I kept testing the air for that sweet perfume, but I could only taste the sadness and death that the desert held. I had come here to part with my mother who had died from a sinister little blood clot the size of a golf ball. It had taken her life away a little bit at a time and I hated it, and it was still in her brain as she lay in her casket and I was glad that the little bastard was dead too. As the pallbearers lowered her into the cool ground on that October afternoon, I looked around at the Yard. I looked at the headstones that Norman had hidden behind that night and wondered about his memories of that place. I'd always thought mine would be better, but when I looked into the grave again, I thought, maybe not.



Nian H. Wan

## On Becoming Chinese

Becoming Chinese grew on me, like ivies on the trellis. When I was five, I swore that I was just as American as though I had blonde hair and blue eyes. I pushed against the thrust of Chinese tradition that tried to embrace me. But my mother required that I speak Chinese (which I am grateful for today).

"It embarrasses me to go," I said, when I was twelve. We had been at the Annual Dragon Boat Festival along the Charles. The rowboats donned paper mâché dragon heads with fluttering crepe paper beards. The rowers paddled down the Charles, and I felt that people on yachts and other Americans were laughing. "I don't like going," I said the next year. "I won't go." My mother backed down. I guess as I grew older, I was to make up my own mind. After all, I did know how to speak Chinese.

All through grammar school and high school, I was the only Oriental in my grade. The school administrators expected me to achieve academic excellence based on the color of my skin. "You're Asian; you're supposed to be really good in math and science, right?" I told them that I wanted to major in English and perhaps study law. "Where," I asked, "is math and science going to fit?" The school and my parents decided that I should take honors math and honors science. I did, and treated the courses like a game or puzzle. English was where I worked and slaved. My parents decided to launch a campaign. "Every other Chinese success story is based in math and science." They'd tell me about other Chinese students at MIT who majored in engineering and who were going to medical school. "I'm Chinese American," I quipped. "And I love literature... English literature."

"I'm telling you," I said. "I'm majoring in English." I decided to go to Emory University and major in English and pre-law. At Emory, I tried to escape the clutches of "Chinese-ism" by joining a sorority. After all, very few Asians pledged; those who did were

like me. My aunt, who lived only ten miles away, introduced me to Chinese students from church and Georgia Tech, which was five miles away from Emory. These people reaffirmed my belief that this Chinese culture stuff was great — but only if we were old or just came off the boat. My parents' generation called us ABCs — American Born Chinese.

We were Asian American. We loved hot dogs and apple pie. The ABCs at Tech and church spoke no Chinese. Their major concern was not academics but who drove the best imported car. "Fuck Chinese tradition. We're in America and la de da." Young Chinese American women were concerned with MRS. degrees awarded by prominent Chinese boys — they discarded studies. There were parties at the Tech Student Union. These exclusive Chinese American-Only parties were a display of who had the most money. They'd say, "I'm an Asian American."

Slowly, I grew disillusioned. I don't know if it was the Chinese ivy that sprouted in my soul or the "A" in my Advanced Calculus class, but I began to feel Chinese. Chinese. Not ABC, not Asian American... just Chinese. "You've changed. Are we not good enough for you?" my old group chided.

I smiled the mystic Chinese smile that my mother gives me when I question her. The smile meant, "You'll find out in your soul."

I decided that I showed more promise as an engineer because, after all, the Chinese have a gene for all this stuff. I transferred to Tufts and left my old group. At Tufts, I did not join the Asian American "I have a chip on my shoulder" club. No, I didn't join any club. I simply had friends, whether Asian or not. We spoke openly about our heritage. One person was from India and cooked curry dinners for us. "Home cooking," he said, displaying the vegetables sautéed in green-yellow powder. One Jewish friend gave me a package of Matzoh. On the day of the Moon Festival in September, I gave my friends moon cakes — sweet soy bean paste wrapped in a thin crust. "During the revolution, people hid secret messages in them and transported them at night," I said. "That was hundreds of years ago. The Chinese speak of thousands of years."

I now spend hours looking through my father's Chinese



literature books, written in beautiful calligraphy. Or I peruse through his scrolls, where each brush stroke is done to perfection. I am *ho hwei* — regretful — for refusing to learn how to read Chinese. Pride runs through my veins when thinking that my ancestors, for whom language was poetry, developed characters which are pieces of art. Everything in life had to be beautiful.

I will speak only Chinese to my mother, now. I guess it's to symbolize my pride in my blood and of my history. I know that my ancestors knew how to make porcelain before the Europeans even had clay pots. I love my engineering major because it is Chinese. The Chinese love inventing and creating art with science. I carefully write the characters, 万 念 千 年 , which are my name. I smile my ancient smile.

We went rowing along the Charles during the Dragon Boat Festival last year.

"What's that?" a rower asked, in fascination. He eyed two rowboats with paper mâché heads and crepe paper beards fluttering.

"It's the Dragon Boat Festival," I replied. "It's the anniversary of the death of a poet who drowned himself. The dragon boats are trying to find him . . .



## Dan Capone III

### Uncommon Praise

My dad and I have a weird relationship. We love each other but don't really say it. It's kinda like a 50's tough-guy, greased-hair, buddy-type love. "You and I are alike and I think you're OK." It's not a macho thing; I think it's more of a tradition thing. I've only told my dad that I love him once. He's never said it to me.

I have this idea of Dad. I like him. I mean, of course I love him, but I like him too. For years I was stuck in the same rut every kid is; I saw Dad as my dad. That's great, but it's a pretty obscured point of view. I remember sitting in the living room, looking at my Dad watch TV from the couch. I looked past my previous image of him. I wondered, "Who is he? What defines him, makes him different? If I were my dad, who would I be and how would I feel and what would I think?" The answers have come bit by bit as years pass.

He's been a house painter for 26 years. Not the sloppy, outside kind -- the interior, rich-house-and -church-restoration kind. He doesn't make the distinction, but I do -- he's modest. My father is a giving man who always puts others before himself.

For 12 years, my mother has been in and out of hospitals, her subsequent health never reaching its previous level. The bills not paid by insurance were paid with my father's pain. He's up at 5:00am, and by 6:00 he has Mom up, dressed and eating her breakfast. He wakes me and my sister and is on the highway by 7:00, after a quick cup of coffee at Chuck's. At 5:30 he's home, either to read the paper and nap or hurriedly take Mom to the bathroom before going to a game. As President of Callery Park Little League, his summer nights are spent managing his team, as well as the park's problems. I can tell that Dad's true satisfaction comes not from winning games, but from watching the kids have

fun. He treats every kid like his own; any coach out there for himself is not out there for long. At the end of the day, after putting Mom in her room, Dad -- too tired and sore to flop -- lowers himself onto the nearby couch. His boots come off with an "Ohh." He lays back with an "Ahh."

All during this, Dad is generously laid-back. He rarely loses his temper; he's never overwhelmed by his monstrous duties. Anything I ask for, I get. I only ask for the occasional twenty-dollar loan, but he's hinted that he'd send me on Florida vacations, on skydiving jumps, and on motorcycle trips.

Thinking of my Dad, I see the photograph of him at 23 -- a handsome Marine sergeant with my grin. I see him years before, playing stickball in the street -- slick hair, a white tee shirt. He catches the same fly balls that he would later teach me to catch. I see him in his first car, explaining to the cop just how the blowout made him jump the ditch and plow through the cornfield. There's my grin, tickling his face, trying to burst out.

Twenty-five years ago, Dad found a beautiful, ornate printing of a quote by Samuel Johnson that now hangs, mounted with painstaking craftsmanship, by our front door:

*Praise, like gold and diamonds, owes  
its value only to its scarcity.*

When I was younger, he'd bet me candy and Matchbox cars that I couldn't remember what it said. I won the candy every time. On certain occasions, Dad says something that makes me overflow with pride and gush with love. Straight-A report cards, spectacular catches (or at least a hell of a try), taking care of family emergencies when he's at work -- all these have caused him to say, "You're all right, Dan." That's his version of, "I love you and I'm proud of you." It doesn't come often so it means a lot.

In high school I heard, "The Cat's in the Cradle" by Jim Croce. The words slapped my consciousness. Like most teenage boys, I didn't spend much time with my Dad. I realized then that if I took Dad for granted, I'd lose my best friend.

I come home late sometimes, but instead of dragging myself



right to bed, I sit down and talk with my Dad. I ask him how work was or who killed who on the late show. Sometimes he stays asleep. I hang around for a few minutes, even though work or school wants me up in 3 hours; I talk to him anyway. I talk to a man who gives until he hurts but still gives more. A man who sticks to his word, who commits 'til death do they part. Will I be even half the man he is? I say it aloud if he's sleeping, under my breath if he's awake, but every night I say it:

"Goodnight Dad, and hey, you're all right."



**Lynne Gagnon**

## Sharing Warmth

Every morning she'd get out of her bed and look for the cat. Sometimes he'd be on a sunny spot on the floor or on the velvety cushions of the kitchen chair, tucked under the table. On some mornings he would be on the bed with her and she didn't have to look for him.

She would smooth the grey hair on his nose with her finger and stroke between his ears and down his spine, tracing the vertebrae to the end of his tail. She might wrap him in a blanket and sing soft and low, rocking.

She would put his canned food on a plate on the table with a saucer of milk to the left. This was how they ate breakfast. She loved the cat because it was there.

There had once been a family in this house. He, a lawyer, she, his wife, and a baby. They had wanted a baby because they knew they should have. They had been married for some time and a baby was what was needed. The woman left her job to stay and love the baby. The man returned home at night to love the baby. The grandparents visited often bringing gifts and gurgling sounds. They cooed and poked and also loved the baby.

The couple decided that the den made to be a nursery was not of the baby, so they made it to be that way. They papered and painted and recarpeted to make it the baby's.

They bought a rocking chair so that the woman could rock and sing to the baby in her room. The cat would sit at her feet as she

rocked. She would put her lips to the baby's cheek and smell her baby smells.

When she washed the baby, she would sponge her with suds and shape the thin, silken hair into a cone on top of her head. She would look at the baby and laugh and kiss her cool wet face.

The cat's bowl was on the kitchen floor then, and it would watch as the woman made cone shapes on the baby's head.

One day the woman went to look at the baby because she liked to watch her sleep. She peeked smiling, as she would sometimes over the edge of the baby's crib. She loved to look at the baby and listen to its sleeping sounds, of which, this day, there were none. The woman lifted the wilted baby but it was not warm and the smell was different.

The men came to take the baby away, the men whose job it was to do so. The husband screamed and the woman cried and they both tried to hold each other to stop it.

The woman didn't go back to work, nor did she want another baby, as the man did.

So, soon the husband left the wife with only the cat.

The cat sometimes slept in the crib now, but the woman didn't mind. She liked that something warm was sleeping there.

Those who had called and brought her things had stopped. They no longer wanted to look at her or see where the baby had once been. Perhaps that was why no one had noticed the solitary grey hair that had lain by the baby's cool face when the baby last slept.



Jason Rogers

## Mother Desire

Leaves, charred by some  
 slighted plant god,  
 litter the back porch. Did I  
 make improper sacrifices?  
 Maybe I spoke too harshly,  
 the wrong language. My  
 plants died all summer --  
 the Pennyroyal, the Palm;  
 even the Hibiscus, a gift  
 given last spring -- they  
 didn't care for sun, rejected  
 food eyedropped into their water,  
 the tenth drop plunked  
 like a pebble kicked down  
 a deep well. I remember  
 my mother's plants, a column  
 of green along the sill  
 and more above, hanging  
 from brackets, their branches  
 willowing down to mingle  
 with those below. I cannot  
 remember her talking  
 to them, pleading for growth  
 like I did with mine.

Only one of my plants  
 survives -- the catnip.  
 It's still outside.  
 My cat drools at the window,  
 disjoints his nose straining

for a hit of odor.  
 It's November, and I can't  
 bring the plant in --  
 he would only devour it,  
 leave a pot of dirt.  
 Each night, I pick  
 a leaf to quiet his pleas,  
 the shrill cries of hunger.



**Marco J. D'Amico**

## Caught in the Mind Next to Me

I walked up a spiral staircase, not knowing where I was going. It was very dark but the hands on my watch glowed so I could tell the time: 6:30. (It was actually 12:00, my watch was upside down.)

When I reached the top of the staircase, I saw beautiful naked women dancing suggestive dances behind me. They danced in mountains of money. Before me I witnessed stacks of paper, envelopes, and business suits. I saw a red telephone which rang continuously. I picked up the receiver and said, "Hello, can I help you?" All I heard in reply was the buzz of snoring.

I felt useless and wanted to escape, but the staircase was gone. A glowing red "EXIT" sign caught my eye and I thought of movie theaters. I went toward the light, stumbling on rollerskates and briefcases. The door below the sign read "ALARM WILL SOUND - USE ONLY IN CASE OF EMERGENCY." I shrugged and thrust myself forward, surprised at my forwardness.

I found myself on a fire escape, descending into smoky darkness.

**Jim Ryan**

## His Stage

Whistling in the dark,  
he can almost hear the piano  
in the background.  
He is passion.  
Rain-water drips down rusty gutters,  
down iron fire escapes;  
and dull streetlights dance  
on the rain-filled rutted tar-holes.

He sits on an empty orange crate  
wearing an old flannel shirt;  
beads of rain run down his face,  
through his beard;  
and cars whiz by  
in the nighttime drizzle.  
The sounds of sirens vibrate  
to the tops of brick buildings.

He looks straight ahead at nothing,  
just a part of the scenery  
on his passion stage.



Andrew Szava-Kovats

## One Wrong Move

Adam was at the end of his rope — literally. He had one end tied to the big toe of his right foot, the other tied to the trigger of a twelve-gauge. The gun was propped up by the barrel in his hands, the stock between the toes of his left foot. A sure-fire technique, or so he was told. Looking down the barrel made the gun look larger than life, distorted, as if it were a tunnel he could crawl into. If only he could. Perhaps hide in there long enough to regroup, decide to go on, not pull the trigger. The cool black space beckoned. *Sorry not good enough.* The blast was more inviting, the one flash of experience he could count on to be definitive. No bullshit. Pure, simple, real.

He reviewed his preparations for this moment. *Let's see...* Getting rid of his possessions proved to be much more work than he ever imagined. The furniture came with the apartment and would have to stay. *So far so good.* But the rest was a messy business. All the battered utensils in the kitchen: the pots, pans, plates, silverware. . . *Why is there so much?* He lived alone, never had any guests. *Incredible how life got cluttered with so many dead things.*

The books and records were the hardest to part with. They took so long to collect. Years of scavenging through dirty old milk crates at flea markets, bargaining with the old couples who made a point of fighting for every penny they could get. All the journeys to Cambridge, the only place within hundreds of miles he could find anything even remotely off beat, beyond the local taste for Madonna and insipid romance novels. *The trials of being something like an individual. Now these things have to make their way back to the cultural gene pool, recycled.* Once they were all packed up, he thought they took on the bulky appearance of Sisypheus'

rock, a weight that burned millions of calories when it had to be carried down to the Goodwill. At least his body would be lighter for the poor buggers who'd have to carry it out, box it up, and bury it. He would even have done that by himself, if he could.

Goodwill took anything and everything. After the books and records, Adam went on to bring them all his clothing, kitchen equipment, and even his bike. He was reassured to know that at least his things, the pursuit of which had slowly killed him, would bring some life to others, rather than filling the wallets of people with wallets already full.

But then there was the business with the manuscripts, songs, master tapes, paintings. He thought of all those years of his life going nowhere, yet creating such a mass of material. *It seems endless.* All he could remember were long periods of boredom, drinking in front of a TV. Yet somewhere along the line he must have broken away from the jobs, the shopping, the cleaning, the sleeping, the love-making, and found a few moments of brilliance. *Where are they now?*

He mailed all his master tapes to the record companies he had worked for. All unreleased material. They had stolen all his work anyway. Sure, he had a contract. Worthless words. For years they kept sending statements showing sales figures of so many thousand copies sold, but no profit. Yet the company was issuing paychecks to the executive, his secretary, the guy who packed the boxes, the people who pressed the records, even the guy who swept their floors got a paycheck. Everyone but Adam got paychecks. He wondered if maybe he should have gotten a job sweeping their floors. *Oh well. . . water under the bridge.* Except he was in that water, drowning.

He mailed all his manuscripts to various publishers who had rejected them in the past. No return envelope. The post office loved him during those days. He had given them most of what was left in his bank account. He'd never seen the clerks so friendly, snapping to attention with, "Good morning Adam!" and "Beautiful day, isn't it." He was giving them all a new sense of job security. Or did they secretly relish the thought of him checking out of this overcrowded hotel called life, he wondered. It would mean more room for them all, more jobs, more money



circulating. They smelled blood and liked it. All the resources would be divided among fewer consumers.

The paintings were something else. He would let no one take them. He picked a blazing day of sun, donned a beret, and with his paintings tied to his back, made his way to the nearest cemetery. It was a few weeks after Memorial Day, and the flowers on the graves were long dead, crumbling to dust. Most of Adam's paintings were portraits, so he walked around looking at the gravestones, checking names, dates, ages at which people died, and matched his mental image of the deceased with one of his portraits. Then he placed the painting on the grave. The richer corpses had monuments, so he could lean the paintings against these, standing them upright. When finished the cemetery looked like a gallery. He saw the gods smile and knew it was good. *Dust to dust, pigment to pigment, soul to soul.* He took off his beret, bowed, and left.

When he returned to his apartment, now empty but for the furniture, he cracked a beer. All that running around made him thirsty. After a couple of brews he got the urge to write, maybe leave a final note. *To whom? Saying what?* There was no paper, no pens. *Oh well, concentrate on the other thing.* He was ready. But what about the apartment? There could be no loopholes, no mistakes. The pilot lights to the stove and furnace were off. Windows closed, doors locked. The gas valves, water valves, and circuit breakers were turned off, switched off, dead.

It was a little past noon. *Good choice.* Everyone was at work -- those who had it -- everyone but him. No witnesses. All was in place, at peace. *Alone with the gods lurking within the gun.* Perhaps they would be kinder than the ones he had faced for the last thirty-three years. Gods besieged him daily. Battles against bills, worries, fears, failures at all the pursuits he thought others made sport of and won. Well, now he would give himself to different gods.

Those ugly gods had one last chance to come out of their hiding places. Perhaps they would finally explain why the things he worked so hard at turned to shit. Tell him why he lost so many jobs. Where were the gods, that fateful day, when the boss, with his fat, well-paid face told him there was "no more room on the

payroll" for him? "The economy has hit us all," he said. Funny, he showed no signs of its brutality. He had a house, paid for, fancy lunches every day, all the trimmings of a man who made money from others' work. "This is no reflection on the quality of your work," he said. Well, wasn't that a relief! After ten years of faithful, hard-working, productive service, he was being dumped into a world, a market that had no more use for what he did. All those late nights at the office, for what? The early mornings on the job site, dealing with shift, cigar-smoking contractors, for what? To be dumped like a falling stock? So Adam hung his head and took what the boss had to give: nothing. "Thanks," he said, and shuffled off to the unemployment line. One-time professionals, now losers, trying to keep from looking at each other as they made their way toward their consolation prize. The parade of sinners. But what was their sin? They had done what they were told. They had gone through the prescribed training, performed the tasks requested by their bosses, and this was their reward. To be looked upon as lepers, outcasts of the tribe of workaholics. The claim processors looked dazed as the parade approached. The leper colony avoided any eye contact among themselves, the one place they might have found some understanding. The doomed found simple ways to avoid further doom. Looks do kill.

Suddenly the neighborhood dogs went into one of their tantrums, a fit of barking. Adam imagined their teeth slashing flesh -- human, animal. An intruder, perhaps, caught in someone's yard. The dogs knew how to work it. Pretend to work for a human, protect his house, the wife, the barbecue. All the while waiting, eating his food, laughing behind his back. Their day had come.

As the barking subsided, he noticed the sweat forming on his face, dripping from his nose, his eyebrows, his chin, everywhere. Even his ears seemed to be sweating. His shirt was saturated, his hands slimy. *Will the barrel slip? Better put it in the mouth.* Then the itching began, from the skull, working its way down, covering his entire body. Ignore it. He could not move, would not. There was only one last move his limbs would ever make. He concentrated on that. His toe, with one twitch, would do the dirty



work that the rest of his being was never able to do. Just one twitch. Simplicity itself. He imagined himself the genius inventing the gun. How many times did the thing blow-up in his face before he got it right? Or did he get it right the first time? It was truly a miraculous thing...

Then the phone rang. (He forgot to disconnect it!) His reflexes did their thing. The rope did its thing. The trigger did its thing. The gods did theirs.



Stephen Lussier

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The nurse moved the three of us to the Family Room at the Cape Cod Hospital; it was a small room with a thick green carpet. In the corner stood a flimsy bookcase with simulated woodgrain vinyl applied over the particle board. Every book was about coping with tragedy or inspirational explanations of death.

I realized that the Family Room had nothing to do with families. The name implies a playroom for parents with young children, a sort of retreat from the depression of the waiting rooms. The room should have been called the Dying Room. It was the exact opposite of the waiting room for expectant fathers. There people wait for an arrival to the world; here they wait for a departure.

"Have you reached Gail's family?" the nurse said, almost whispering.

"Her parents and her brother are on their way from Springfield, and her husband is coming from Mansfield," Brian's voice boomed in the silence, "What exactly is happening to Gail?"

The nurse had been nodding silently as Brian answered her, but was shaken by the bluntness of his question. We had had enough of waiting and worrying. We had had enough of phone calls and not being able to describe what had happened to Gail. We had had enough of calling the manager of the club we were supposed to be playing at and his request that we play without Gail. He even offered to give us half-pay — we hung up.

I felt bad for the nurse as she visibly struggled for a response. She was probably thinking about what she had been taught to say and how inappropriate it was. She must hate these nights. I wondered how often she had to do this.

"We think that Gail has had a brain aneurism," she began, "Do you know what that is?"

Three stolid faces. She continued.

"It's when a weak blood vessel in the brain bursts. A, uh, priest has been in to see Gail — we don't think she will, uh, make it through the, uh, night."

The nurse was moved. It's always difficult to be the bearer of such horrible news, but when the victim is so young — only twenty-nine — it must be unbearable.

"You can go see her."

No response.

"I really think you'll regret it if you don't."

She lead us to the door preparing us for what we were about to see.

"She really looks, umm, awful," she quavered, "she has tubes and hoses, ya' know, and . . ." She did not bother to finish.

Gail was on a bed on the other side of the door leading out of the Dying Room. Her skin was grey and she had black circles around her eyes. Her mouth was stretched around a huge clear tube. Many smaller tubes hung from bags on metal stands and ran in different directions. Some went into her arms and some disappeared under the coarse yellow blanket.

I kept expecting Gail to move, not to get up or anything, just a twitch or a flex of the arm. Maybe she could open her eyes.

Nothing but the eerie gurgle of the respirator and the electronic beat of her heart.

I got closer to her bed, and as I searched for her hand, the nurse awkwardly pulled up part of the blanket. Gail's hand was cold and felt heavy in mine.

Think of something to say — say something funny. I could always make Gail laugh. God knows we could all use a good laugh. Nothing seemed appropriate.

"Gail, we have a gig to play. What are you doin' here?"

The stupid line spilled from my mouth. That's not what I wanted to say; I still don't know what I wanted to say.

We stayed for a while looking at Gail, holding her hand, all of us stumbling over our words. Gail stayed right where she was, not moving except for the barely perceptible heaving of her chest. And we listened to the wonderful monotony of her electronic heart beat.



**Stephen Lussier****MacKenzie Blue**

With the hot August sun beating on his leathery back, George spread the paint in long steady strokes as if it were a thick glue. He frequently paused to soak the brush with a load of fresh paint. The color was always the same — MacKenzie Blue. It was a horrid mixture of unknown paints which resulted in the brightest of all imaginable blues, a kind of neon, fluorescent, sky blue. All the blemishes of the house were smothered in the brightness of the paint.

George's appearance was an unflattering mix of George Burns and Winston Churchill. Eighty or more years of living had left his skin hanging loosely on his frame. He never wore a shirt in the summertime, only shorts that were as baggy as his skin. The better part of his youth had been spent at Hampton Beach, and the prolonged exposure to the sun left his skin a permanent copper hue.

Between strokes of paint, George would sometimes catch a glimpse of his wife, Jenny, in the picture window. He would wave to her, and she would blush or giggle like a child that had been caught spying. Jenny had alzheimer's disease.

Even before her illness, George did everything for Jenny. He did all of the shopping and the little bit of cleaning he thought necessary. He never let her drive, nor did he let her help him paint. No one noticed the early stages of her disease because she had been virtually immobile for fifty years of marriage.

George believed that it was the man's duty to learn and to do everything for himself. When I was thirteen or so, I put together a bicycle for George's neighbor. George walked over to see how I was doing. While I was struggling with a part of the bike, the woman who owned it leaned over to help. George

grumbled, "Let the kid do it himself; he's never gonna learn a goddamn thing with everybody helping him."

While climbing down the ladder to get more paint, George spat a stream of the tobacco he had been chewing into the bushes. Tobacco chewing, according to George, was his sole vice, and he spat in front of anyone. "What's the big deal for Chrissake," he used to grumble when Jenny would make a face at his spitting.

On his way out of the garage with a new gallon of MacKenzie Blue, George noticed some marks on the outside of the garage door frame. It looked like some kind of animal had been chewing the wood. George knew what the marks really were.

One afternoon, I saw George returning from the supermarket. His dark gold 1974 Ford sputtered its way up the driveway. It took George several tries to get the huge car into the garage. Each time he rolled forward the front end of the Ford nibbled away a little bit of the wood. His eyesight was failing in spite of his glasses. Now in his eighties, George realized he was getting old.

He kept driving.

"A new coat of paint," he probably thought to himself, "and that garage door will be just fine."



Dorothy Hall

## The Cat

Laura woke up to the cat's frantic scratching beside the bed. Twice he had gotten her up during the night: once to go out, and what seemed like only minutes later, to come back in. She dragged herself up thinking he wanted to go out again. The cat had run to his dish instead. *Today is the day I will strangle the cat,* she decided. *He's been asking for it for years.*

She was in a bad mood. She had had another fight with Amber, her fifteen-year-old daughter. Amber had gone roller-skating with her new friend Cindy and come home an hour past curfew, with her new nonchalant attitude.

She went out to the kitchen and picked up the cat's dish. The cat kept crashing his head into the cabinet door while she shook some moist cat pellets into its dish. She put the food down. The cat plunged its black head into the food, gave it the quick sniff-test, and rejected it immediately. "Go hungry then," she said.

The cat knew there was a piece of leftover pot roast in the fridge. The other male in the house, who happened to be the woman's husband, had already given him pellets. The cat knew he could wear her down for something better. The cat knew the husband was more powerful than him. Most of the time the Powerful One took a neutral stand about the cat — unless of course the cat went too far. The cat had learned not to get on the bed with the woman until her husband had left in the morning. When the Powerful One put food in his dish, he ate it or left the kitchen in a huff. He never tried to wear the Powerful One down. He knew he would get picked up by the scruff and thrown out the door. A dim image of some long ago maternal authority figure would come to the cat at these times.

The woman's husband tried to ignore the cat as much as possible. The cat had come with the woman. And the husband

always had the vague feeling that the woman wouldn't have come to him if she couldn't have brought the cat. He knew the cat sneaked up on the beds when he wasn't around, but as long as the cat didn't defy him openly he let it go. In the beginning the cat had interrupted their love-making, but he had cured the cat of that. And he had learned never to approach his wife in a romantic manner when she was opening a can of cat food.

The cat followed Laura's feet back and forth while she made her coffee. He butted into her leg when she opened the refrigerator door for the milk. She nudged it out of the way with the toe of her slipper. She wondered what kept her from crossing that fine line and kicking the cat across the room. "You'll go outside," she said as he ran into her ankle. But then she remembered, today was the day he went for his yearly shots and to have his mats cut off. She felt guilty about the cat's fur. By the time she had got to brushing out his winter coat it was a matted mess. The fact that he liked to sit outside in the rain and get himself soaked didn't help either.

"OK! OK! you little vulture." She broke off a piece of the pot roast, pulled it into shreds and threw it into the cat's dish. Maybe now she could have her coffee in peace.

She went out on the porch to get the cat carrier. The dog saw her get the carrier and knew the cat was going to the vet. *I hope he sticks the little beast good,* the dog thought. The dog always thought the cat got away with murder. He didn't have to sit, heel, or stay when he was told.

*He goes anywhere he wants,* the dog thought, *while I have to stay in the yard behind this fence. I hear him down in the woods killing those little squeaky things all day. Then the little beast brings them up in my yard like he's done something wonderful. Filthy little murderer.*

When Laura came in with the carrier, Amber was up and sitting at the kitchen table. "I'm in a hurry this morning. I have to drop the cat off at the Cat Doctor. You'll have to get your own breakfast."

Amber mumbled something and tried to pick up the cat. The cat resisted by putting his claws out. "Little jerky maniac," she said, dropping the cat down.

The cat had decided he was going to punish her for awhile.



Last week she had kicked him off her bed and out of the house just because that new friend of hers was allergic to cats. *All those years that I kept her company*, the cat thought. *No sense of loyalty at all.*

Laura had gotten dressed and it was time to put the cat in his carrier. She had lined it with plenty of newspapers. The cat always embarrassed her by messing in his carrier on the way to the Cat Doctor.

"Amber, you hold the carrier. I'll put the cat into it." She picked up the cat, of course he struggled, so she lost her patience and shoved him in. He started crying and scratching at the wire door. *I hope he messes before I get him in the car.* But she knew he wouldn't; he'd wait until they were halfway there. She would start to think maybe this time he isn't going to do it, but he would. Halfway to the Cat Doctor, the cat messed. "I'm going to put you out at the next stop sign," Laura said, as she rolled down the car window.

Laura set the cat carrier down on the stainless steel treatment table. "And here's Benjamin my star patient," the Cat Doctor said. "And he's brought us a nice stool sample. Isn't he a good boy." The vet lifted Benjamin out of his cage, and his assistant lifted out Benjamin's stool sample. The cat, who had been handling the Cat Doctor for years, dilated the pupils in his golden eyes, looked up at the Cat Doctor, and started to purr. He had long ago learned that most humans heard that sound as a compliment to themselves.

"I'll pick him up at four o'clock," said Laura.

"Listen to him purr," said the vet's new assistant. "I think he likes you, Doctor."

"Yes he does," said the vet. "He's been my patient for a long time."

He put the cat down on the floor. The cat rubbed himself against the doctor's leg. "Make sure you give him some extra treats after you clip and bathe him," the doctor told his assistant. Benjamin's tail shot up as he went to rub himself against the assistant.

"Does he mind being bathed?" the new assistant asked.

"Oh, no. I bet nobody has ever had so much as a bad thought

about this cat," said the Cat Doctor. "He never gives us a bit of trouble."



**Susan Oleksiw**

## The Artist

Sally never finished a painting without a crisis. After seventeen years she knew this. It was on her mind as she dabbed at the unfinished figure in the bottom right-hand corner of the canvas. She could feel the crisis for this painting coming on, and she squirmed on her stool as the paintbrush failed to shape an arm at her command.

Outside, the cold air polished the gold of the leaves lying on the darkening ground, the sun slipped away from the empty branches crisscrossing in front of the window. In less than an hour it would be dark, much too late to work but too early for supper and much too early to drop in on friends for an evening's chat. She dropped her brush into a jar of turpentine and her chest sank down into her waist. Maybe she should get another cat. The apartment felt empty, not just the studio, but the whole apartment, all four rooms.

By seven o'clock in the evening the dinner dishes sat piled in the sink, her brushes were cleaned, and Sally was dialing the third name on the list in front of her. The voice that answered was warm and friendly, and it took Sally only a minute to get what she wanted.

"I thought you were working on something special," Liz said as she took a spoon from a drawer and tossed it to Sally. Sally caught it and stirred her coffee, looking around at the familiar space, wondering what was different.

"Did you change the cupboards in here?" Sally finally asked.

"Dave painted them last month. You haven't been around for a while, have you?"

"Guess not," Sally agreed. "What did you ask me?"

"Just about your work. Is it something special?"

"They're all special," Sally said with a grim smile. Liz tipped her head to look at her friend. "You know what I mean," Sally said.

"I guess." She settled on the other end of the sofa, stirring her herbal tea, watching her friend. "So what are you working on?"

"Well, it started out as a portrait of a group of kids I saw in the park one day. I got them down well in a quick sketch. I went back every now and then to get the feel of the place, the colors and smells. Everything fell onto the canvas just right; I could feel the forms growing out of the background, coming out to meet me. Then it all went flat. I don't know what happened."

Liz nodded and stirred, her motions synchronized like those of a woman used to listening. "I think I've heard this before, haven't I?" she said with a smile.

"Many times," Sally admitted. "That doesn't make it any easier."

"You always get through it." Liz called out to Dave to come in from the other room, and he flopped down in the chair opposite them, questioning Sally about her painting, her teaching, her shows. Sally answered, slipping into the comfortable role of the guest who must be entertained, forgetting that she had invited herself in by arriving on the doorstep after an unexpected phone call.

By midnight Sally was back at her apartment, tired and relieved. It was too late to work on her canvas, even if she could think of something to do with it. Her efforts to slough off her deepening paralysis had failed, but at least she didn't have to confront the depth of her failure by taking brush in her deadened hand.

The weekend passed as it always did when Sally reached this point. She wandered along Newbury Street looking in galleries on Saturday afternoon, dropping in at favorite restaurants on Saturday evening, and taking a long walk on Sunday afternoon after reading the paper. By Sunday evening, she was tired of telling people she ran into how much she enjoyed the solitude of the artist. She was bored and frustrated, and wanted only to finish her painting.

The talent she had found in her hands in elementary school



was a joy to her parents, a surprise to her teachers, and a mild diversion to herself. It eased her way through high school and college, ensuring an automatic entrée into art programs and student shows. When the chairman of her department told her she had to work harder to maintain herself in the art world, she shrugged her shoulders and promised to do what he asked. She painted more because she painted faster, but she couldn't see that any one painting differed markedly from any other she had ever done. Her professor praised her for her progress.

None of that meant anything to her. The only part of the artistic life that interested her was the first moment of painting, the moment of standing alone in front of a blank canvas with the brush in her hand, waiting to see what would emerge. At that moment she felt fully alive, as though her interior were one with the canvas, the white-painted linen drawing out from her something that would emerge in no other way. That and that alone kept her painting. The graceful figures she produced in drawing classes impressed teachers and students alike, but sparked nothing in her; the patterns that emerged in abstract paintings entranced her parents' friends and were quickly purchased. Again, Sally felt nothing. The only stirrings came when she stood before the blank canvas, and only the promise of facing another blank canvas drew her on to the end of every painting.

The irony and unfairness of her situation did not pass her by; she produced in the end, with ease, what her fellow students sweated over, night after night. She never told them how easy it was for her, and how little she cared about the final painting, for fear of having no friends at all in school or later. As it was, plenty of them were jealous, but plenty were able to hide it -- for the most part -- until she gave them cause to hate her. It didn't matter to her one way or the other; the novelty of her situation had worn off long before college, and she continued on only to create again the moment of the blank canvas.

The Monday design class presented portfolios that week, so Sally was fully occupied for the whole day, relieved of thinking about the frustration facing her at home. When the classrooms and studios emptied out after five o'clock, Sally was still in her

office, swinging back and forth in her swivel chair, which she had rescued from the maintenance storeroom for its dark green leather and shiny steel frame. No one else liked it, but Sally wanted to see it when she opened her office door, the green leather complementing the forest scene painting hanging on the wall. She hadn't seen the artist in several years, not since she finished the series of still lifes she had done in his studio while hers was being painted.

The recollection of working in Harry's studio took hold of her mind, and her thoughts swirled lazily around the idea of working in someone else's studio as she swiveled her chair back and forth. The problem was, she didn't know anyone else now who had a large enough studio to let her share space while she had something done to her own. She could always pretend, she told herself, that she had encountered some kind of problem. Her mind moved on to problems that could push her out of her studio but not out of her apartment in the autumn. November was cold, and she didn't want to move into the Y for a few days or weeks just to bolster her excuse for needing to share studio space.

The sound of a large metal container being dragged along the hallway brought Sally back to the present. She waited for the janitor to come around the corner.

"Hi, Max," she said as he backed into her view.

"Lo, Sally," Max replied, his eye still on the floor as he looked for scraps of paper. "You still here?"

Sally wondered about the life of people that allowed them to use obvious questions in place of authentic conversation, then decided she was probably no better than most. "Yeah, just thinking."

"Got a problem?" Max asked, his eye still on the floor.

"I need to share some studio space with someone for a little while." She watched Max, imagining his form framed by a canvas, his limbs extending beyond the stretchers, his head cut off by the straight piece of wood, like the abstract designs cut by borders on certain Oriental rugs, a sign of the Eastern belief in the limitations of human artifice.

"Sounds familiar," he said, straightening up and looking at her. Sally stared back at him. "Didn't you have some trouble like



that a year ago?"

"Hmmm," Sally said.

"I thought so." He returned his attention to the floor; satisfied that he had picked up the various loose scraps, he pulled out his broom and began to sweep a section of the hallway in front of Sally's office door. "There's a room down in the storage area that's not being used. It has lots of light in the afternoon from them windows along the back. It smells. That's the only bad thing. Dust and the furnace."

"Thanks, Max, but that's not quite what I had in mind."

"No? So what did you have in mind? You could use the studios here in the school when everyone's gone home. Lots of teachers do."

"I know. That's still not what I had in mind."

Max stood watching her swiveling in her chair, then went back to his sweeping. "Well, I got no more ideas." He swept up the remaining dirt, collected it for his cannister, and moved on down the hall. Sally listened to him go.

By the end of the week things were no better. The paint was drying faster than Sally wanted to admit to herself, but the brushes sat on in the jar of turpentine; the tubes of paint were capped and put away. Her students, it seemed, were losing ability rather than gaining it, and she snapped at them for their stiff figures, their impure colors, their dead souls on paper. Those who had studied with her before stood back, listened to their Walkmans, and went on working; those who had never worked with her before winced under her eye as she approached their easels, nursed the pain later in their dorms, and looked on their work with an unexpected sense of disappointment. Sally warned them that midterm grades were due soon.

Restless and edgy, Sally wandered into the printmaking studio late on Friday afternoon, stopping to look at artwork that otherwise would not have interested her. No one here ever faced the same blank canvas that drew her, and she wondered about how printmakers began their work and proceeded week after week. There was no appeal in it for her at all. A few students were closing up their tool kits, but Sally ignored them, working her way around the periphery of the room, ostensibly looking at

the work on the walls but more truthfully working off the simmering frustration within her. She had to find studio space to share with someone or her current painting would sit in her studio unfinished, a wall between her and the next canvas.

"Shall I leave the lights on for you?" she heard a voice say.

"No, don't bother," Sally said without looking at the speaker. Wherever she went in the school these days, it seemed a maintenance man came up behind her. She brushed past the man as she headed for the door, noting that he was new.

"Philip Stark," he said as an introduction. "We've been doing woodcuts."

"I can see that," Sally said, making no effort to hide her irritation.

"You're Sally Wittle. Painting," he said, still smiling despite Sally's reply.

"Yes."

"That's my real work, too," he said, "painting. But that's not what the school needed." He nodded to the work on the wall.

"You paint?" Sally said, swinging around again just as she reached the doorway.

"Watercolors." Watercolors never interested Sally; she hated the way the paint reached beyond the control of her brush, living on its own after she drew her hand back. Still, she was desperate.

"You work here at the school?" she asked.

"Sometimes. One of the janitors lets me use a room downstairs." He shut off the lights as he followed her out into the hallway.

"Max offered me some space recently," Sally said. "I have a problem at my apartment; the heat went out in my studio so I can't work there for longer than half an hour, which doesn't do me much good. I was thinking about working here at the school in one of the rooms downstairs. How do you like it?"

"It's quiet, easy to work, although the light isn't as good as I would like. Still, it's all I have, so I'm satisfied. My place isn't large enough for me to work in."

"That's too bad," Sally said. She spoke perfunctorily, and ignored Philip's startled look at her flat tone. At any other time she might have made the effort to conceal her lack of interest in



anyone else's circumstances.

"Care to see it sometime?"

"Yeah," Sally said, heading for the stairs. Philip followed, putting his car keys back into his jacket pocket, and falling in behind her.

The sight of the matted pictures along the wall and standing on the easel drew Sally into the room and around the chairs and boxes stored at one end. She walked along the wall with the appearance of studying the work sitting on the floor, but her mind was on something else. Max's voice was cluttering her head, but she couldn't remember how many rooms he said he had down here. Was this the only one, or would he find another one for her if she asked, thwarting her plans, wasting her arrangements, squeezing away her energy?

"Max said I could work down here," she began. "I didn't realize he meant for us to share it. I hope you don't mind?" She kept her back to Philip while she spoke so he couldn't force her to read his reluctance in his eyes, if that was indeed what he might be feeling.

"Well, I don't suppose so," he said. She could hear his surprise, his doubt, his unwillingness.

"You seem to be a neat one," Sally said, turning around to him. "I'm not, but I always clean up after myself. We should get along okay."

"We probably don't have the same schedules, anyway," he replied.

"That was really good luck for me to run into you," she said. "I've been so anxious to finish my painting and it's hard not to be able to work. You know how it is." She didn't care if he did or not, but she knew that he would respond to an appeal to camaraderie.

"Yeah," he said as he followed her to the door.

"See you tomorrow," Sally said as she bounded up the stairs. She left him down in the basement, standing in the darkened doorway and the now-silent building. Even Max went home on time on Friday afternoon.

For the better part of Saturday afternoon Sally paced the cement floor of the storeroom, circling around Philip's easel and

her own, prowling among the boxes and gangly piles of chairs, glaring at the artwork set along the wall, then walking on again, her hands in her pockets and her shoulders hunched. By five-thirty she was certain Philip would not show up, and she shut out the light and slammed the door behind her.

When she passed Philip in the hall on Monday morning she ignored him, pretending an intense concentration on the letter she carried in her hand while she walked hunched over to her classroom. Her students were more offensive than ever, she felt, and she coped by distancing herself from them. At lunchtime she wandered down to the storeroom, carrying a sandwich she had no intention of eating. Philip didn't even look up when she came in, his eye on the charcoal form emerging from the tablet of paper he held on his lap. Sally pulled a chair from beside the wall, sat down, and unwrapped her sandwich, letting the crackling and tearing sift through the air to meet the sound of the furnace a few doors away. Philip scraped his feet on the floor. Sally ate. She drank her coke through a straw, searching the bottom of the paper cup for one last slurp but finding only air. Mashing the cup down into the paper bag, she crushed the whole thing into a large ball. She tossed her bag of trash across the room to a wastebasket, missed, and watched it land on the floor nearby. Philip looked at the bag, then turned around to look at Sally. She shrugged as she walked out the door, on her way back to the classroom.

Late in the afternoon Sally went back to the storeroom, flipped on the lights when she saw it was empty, and saw the bag of trash from lunch sitting on the top of the heap in the wastebasket. There was no sign of Philip, and none that he planned to return that evening. After an hour of prowling around the perimeter of the room, she threw a Kleenex into the corner and left, shutting out the lights with a single downward swipe at the light switch.

On Tuesday morning Sally strolled the halls, checking to make sure she knew where Philip was. When he slipped past her classroom just before lunch, she caught him out of the corner of her eye. Dismissing her class early, she gathered some paints and headed down to the storeroom, her grip on the stretchers tense and stiff. She dropped the canvases against a wall, and walked up behind Philip, who was working on a charcoal drawing at his



easel.

"I never saw anyone here using that kind of charcoal," Sally said.

"I've always used this." Philip spoke after a moment of silence but still didn't look up.

"No one around here would use that. It's really cheap charcoal." She walked over to the stack of matted prints, pushing a few aside with her foot and leaving the mark of her toe on a cream-colored mat. She knelt down to look closer at them. "Cheap charcoal messes up a drawing." Pushing herself up, she left the room without a glance at Philip.

Her students were more tolerable during the afternoon design class, and she let them work on their own, satisfied for the moment that they could produce without constant guidance. Occasionally she drifted into another classroom to see what someone else's students were doing, but only if the instructor was out of the room. Philip went by sometime after four-thirty, and Sally kept an eye out for his return trip. By five o'clock all of her students were packed and gone, unlike the first weeks of the fall term, when many stayed well past the dinner hour to finish a painting or drawing. Sally closed up and headed down to the storeroom.

Philip turned when she came in, then turned back to his tablet. Sally looked around the room, at once alert to the changes.

"What're you doing?" she asked, her body stiffening.

"Moving out."

"What's the matter? Do I make you self-conscious?" she asked with a sneer to cover her uneven breathing.

"It's easier to work in my classroom after the students have left," he said. "I don't have to move so much around."

"Really?" She stuffed her hands in her pockets and glared at his back. Philip went on packing up his brushes. "I'll bet." Philip didn't reply. "I'll bet," she said, walking around the room. Her breathing grew more labored, her body stiffer. The last thing she wanted was for him to move out, at least not yet. She circled him standing at his easel. "The charcoal, right?" He put his crayons away and snapped shut his box. "Right?" she said, stepping up close to him.

"I do better when I can work alone, I guess," he said with a smile. She hated the smile.

"Of course, you do," she said, moving closer. "Who could dabble with someone watching him? Right?" His jaw clenched, but he turned from her to collect his work along the wall. "That's what it's like around here," she went on. "Those of us who are serious go on working no matter what, nothing stops us, nothing holds us up. When I have to finish a painting, nothing stands in my way. No one trips me up. No amateurs, no dabblers, no part-timers, no Sunday afternoons."

He swirled around to face her, contempt written all over his face. He sneered, and turned her words against her, matching her insult for insult, sarcasm for sarcasm, word for word. She didn't blanch, but went on, throwing at him all the insults she had collected from seventeen years of frustration and five years of teaching, not letting him get his breath even once before he had to talk back. His hands trembled when he finally zipped up his portfolio, his face red, his chin jutting out. He bumped the frame as he jerked through the doorway, his elbow twitching but rigid, his chin pushing in and out as though under the strain of a leash. She heard him lumbering down the hall, his portfolio hitting the wall as he turned to climb the stairs. Then he was gone and the only sound was the furnace laboring heavily, like a boxer worn out from a fight but still on his feet.

Sally turned to her canvas, now almost dry, sitting on the easel. She grabbed tubes of paint, a palette, a brush, blocking out the sounds of the old building and the ringing in her ears, the pounding in her head. A tight, hard arm emerged beneath her brush, long fingers stretched out to the center of the canvas, the picture grew into one vision. By midnight she was done.



## Contributors

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